

The Bulgarian monarchy: a politically motivated revision of a historical image in a post-socialist transitional society

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From its foundation in 1878, which was a consequence of the previous Russian-Turkish war, up to 1946 pre-socialist Bulgaria had a monarchic constitution. It was finally abandoned on 8 September 1946 by a manipulated referendum, which turned Bulgaria into a 'People's Republic'. The last king, Simeon II, had to leave the country, but did not abdicate formally instead, but he kept his title as a monarch in exile.¹

During the years of communist rule, which lasted until 1989, it was unthinkable for Simeon to return to his home country – let alone resume political functions. The rejection of the monarchy and its representatives as reactionary and feudalist by the communists was too clear. On the contrary, they were eager to eliminate any positive memory of the monarchy in the public. They did so by creating an official image of history which blamed the monarchy for being the main reason, or at least, a very important precondition for all negative developments in the history of Bulgaria since 1878. Significant terms, such as "adventurism" for Bulgaria's participation in the Balkan wars and the First World War under King Ferdinand or 'monarcho-fascism' for the authoritarian regime of Boris III, were chosen in order to make the period before 1944 a part of the public memory as a past which was dark but had been overcome.²

After the change of 1989 and the end of the communist monopoly on public opinion, all of a sudden the possibility of a historical re-evaluation of the Bulgarian monarchy occurred. At the time, politicians, that is, mainly the leaders of the "Union of Democratic Forces" (UDF), including President Petăr Stoyanov and Prime Minister Aleksandăr Kostov, journalists but also authors claiming to be academic, such as Božidar Dimitrov, the director of the National Historical Museum, took the lead in a movement which sometimes aimed at glorifying the monarchy, but in any case tried to present it as a positive era in contrast to the communist one-party dictatorship.³ From 1996 onwards, the regular visits of Simeon II, partly initiated by the UDF, to Bulgaria from his Spanish exile helped the monarchic movement gain popularity. However, a real political perspective for him appeared only around the turn of the millennium, when the Bulgarians got increasingly disappointed with the established political parties as well as their representatives and started looking for new alternatives.⁴ By spring 2001, Simeon managed to win so much support among the public that he took the risk of entering the Bulgarian political scene: as head of his organisation "The National Movement Simeon II" (NDSV) he participated in the

¹ Generally about Bulgarian history see e.g. R.J. Crampton, 'Historical Foundations', in K.-D. Grothusen ed. *Südosteuropa-Handbuch*, Vol. VI, Göttingen 1990: 27-55.

² B. Koen, 'Die monarchofaschistische Oberschicht, Hitlerdeutschland und die Judenfrage', in Bulgarische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Institut für Geschichte (ed.), *Bulgarisch-deutsche Beziehungen und Verbindungen*, Vol. 4, Sofia 1989: 20-41 (20-2).

³ About Bulgarian "Para-Historiography" see I. Iliev, 'On the history of inventing Bulgarian history', *IWM Working Paper* 5, 2000: 13. One of the most prominent representatives of this movement is Bozhidar Dimitrov, head of the National Historical Museum in Sofia.

⁴ M. Wien, 'Ab heute ist Bulgarien nicht mehr dasselbe Land'. Die Parlamentswahlen vom 17. Juni 2001', *Südosteuropa. Zeitschrift für Gegenwartforschung*, 4/2001: 13-32 (13).

parliamentary elections of 17 June and, by winning 43% of the votes and 50% of the seats in Parliament, he achieved an overwhelming victory. Paradoxically, he now had to become prime minister, i.e. take a position within a republican government. It is rather debatable whether he had actively aimed at this 'career', since he hesitated for more than three weeks after the elections before he took this step. Now, as prime minister, Simeon, who had never abdicated as king, found himself in the republican hierarchy below the President, the Vice-President and the President of Parliament.⁵

However, his success in the elections would have been impossible, if the general attitude of the Bulgarian public towards the monarchy had not fundamentally changed since 1989 – even if other reasons, such as deep public disappointment with Aleksandăr Kostov's UDF government, might have played an important role as well. This attitude towards the monarchy, which directly focussed on Simeon's public appearance, was, nevertheless, from a historical perspective, related rather to the monarch as an individual than to the monarchic institution itself, i.e. its constitutional relevance. This was true not only after 1989, but also before.

Adventurism and monarcho-fascism

As regards the historical evaluation of the Bulgarian monarchy, the country's socialist historiography focussed primarily on the person of Boris III and his government. Compared to him, relatively little attention was paid to the previous monarchs, least of all to the first Prince of Bulgaria, Alexander von Battenberg.⁶ His successor, King Ferdinand, was portrayed, by both socialist as well as post-socialist historiography including public memory, as a monarch who failed.⁷ The most important reason for this is, of course, Bulgaria's defeat in the First World War, which resulted in Ferdinand's abdication and his return to Germany, his country of origin. A positive aspect in this portrait was, however, the liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule in 1908 and the country's advancement to the status of a kingdom. Under Ferdinand, however, Bulgaria participated in three wars between 1912 and 1918, which finally resulted in the so-called "National catastrophe".⁸ Although there is no dissent as to the disastrous character of these events, new tendencies in the evaluation of the motives of Ferdinand's policy emerged after the system change of 1989 – in contrast to Marxist historiography, which had blamed the king for political and military adventurism.⁹ Since then, academic historiography as well as journalists and other non-academic publishers have shown an increasing understanding, if not sympathy, for the decision taken by Ferdinand's regime to wage war. The revival of evaluative patterns, known from the interwar period, is characteristic for such tendencies. One of their most prominent representatives is the clearly nationalist historian Božidar Dimitrov, known from many appearances on TV. His works enjoy a broad public reception and, thus, have a significant influence on public images of history. According to him, the Balkan Wars and the First World War were not military

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ About Alexander v. Battenberg see, e.g. J. Geševa, 'Režimăt na pälnoštija (1881-1881) – svoeobrazna forma na upravlenie na dăržavata', in *Bälgarska akademija na naukite. Institut po istorija* ed. *120 godini izpälnitelna vlast v Bälgarija*, Sofia 1999: 91-103.

⁷ M. Petrov, 'Nacionalnijat väpros v politikata na bälgarskite pravitelstva (1879-1919)', in: *120 godini*, 128-47.

⁸ About the Bulgarian independence see: C. Todorova, 'Die europäische Diplomatie und die Erklärung der Unabhängigkeit Bulgariens im Jahre 1908', in *Bulgarisch-deutsche Beziehungen*, Vol. 4, 127-52.

⁹ See e.g. G. Markov, 'Germanija i učastieto na Bälgarija v balkanskite vojni (1912-1913)', in *Bulgarisch-deutsche Beziehungen*, Vol. 4, 153-80.

adventures, but wars for national unification supposed to integrate those Bulgarian territories which were still under foreign, i.e. Ottoman, rule into their motherland. The only mistake Ferdinand made in Dimitrov's view was diplomatic dilettantism. In this context, the wars for "National Unification" were nothing but an expression of Ferdinand's aim to fulfill his national mission, i.e. the unification of all ethnic Bulgarians within one state. Therefore, the critique of the king's policy, as it is articulated by the representatives of this view, as well as by a substantial part of the Bulgarian public, does not contain a fundamental rejection, especially as far as war is concerned, but rather focuses on "technical" mistakes made by the monarch.¹⁰

For the most part, Bulgarian historical public interest, however, is devoted to King Boris III. The monarchic idea is mainly associated with his person. In most cases, the debates about this form of government do not deal with the constitutional consequences of monarchy but rather concentrate on Boris's concrete policy, which is then taken as a basis either for accepting or rejecting the monarchy in general.

Historical attention is mainly directed to the last third of his time in power, i.e. the years between 1935 and his unexpected death in 1943. During this period, the king ruled the country in an autocratic way and, thus, was responsible for all important political decisions. This fact becomes even more relevant, since at that time the Second World War began and forced Boris to take fundamental decisions not only as regarded Bulgarian foreign policy but also the internal configuration of the country.¹¹

Due to the authoritarian regime Boris introduced in 1935 because of his dissatisfaction with the "Zveno"-government and due to Bulgaria's accession to the Tri-Partite-Pact in 1941, socialist historiography unambiguously labelled this era as 'monarcho-fascist'.¹² It thus positioned the king's government within its ideologically determined patterns of historical interpretation. It was the characterisation of the system as 'fascist', which provided the necessary legitimacy of the 'antifascist' illegal communist dominated resistance movement, the "Fatherland Front". Post- or non-socialist Bulgarian historiography, however, has clearly rejected the term 'monarcho-fascist' to characterise Boris's regime, pointing out a number of fundamental differences between his rule and the ones of Hitler and Mussolini in Germany and Italy respectively.¹³

However, before, as well as after 1989, one historical event during Boris's government attracted and still attracts most of the attention connected with debate on monarchy in Bulgaria: the survival of the 48,000 Bulgarian Jews during the Second World War. Given the German-Bulgarian alliance this fact has caused astonishment, but the debate about it has always been focussed on the question 'who was responsible for the salvation of the Jews?' Before 1989, there was only one clear answer: the communist resistance within the framework of the "Fatherland Front".¹⁴

¹⁰ B. Dimitrov, Bulgaria in the wars for national unification, in www.bulgaria.com/history/wars.html, last accessed: July 2002.

¹¹ N. Poppetrov, 'Autoritarismus und Autoritäres Regime in Bulgarien', in E. Oberländer, R. Jaworski et al. eds. *Autoritäre Regime in Ostmitteleuropa 1919-1944*, Mainz 1995: 181-95 (195). V. Migevev, 'Formirane na koncepcijata za parlamentarnija model na bälgarskata monarchofašistka dăržava (1937-1938)', in Bälgarska Akademija na Naukite. Institut po istorija ed. *Obštvestveno-političeskijat život na Bälgarija 1878-1944* (Izsledvanija po bälgarska istorija, Vol. 10), Sofia 1990: 289-326.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ I. Dimitrov, 'The Main Factor of the Salvation of the Bulgarian Jews', in *Jahrbuch der jüdischen Kulturorganisation in Bulgarien*, 24, 1989: 242. Also: M. Wien, *Antisemitismus in Bulgarien im Spiegel der Parlamentsdebatten zum „Gesetz zum Schutze der Nation“ 1940*, MA-Thesis, Munich 1999: 1.

Even after 1989 public discourse about the fate of the Bulgarian Jews during the Second World War did not become much more differentiated. Since political life in the country became increasingly polarised, the answer to the question who had saved the Jews was equal to a revelation of one's own political orientation – either towards the 'red' socialist or the 'blue' oppositional movement "Union of Democratic Forces" (UDF). In contrast to the socialists, the blue movement claimed the merit of the salvation of the Bulgarian Jews from the death-camps for King Boris himself.¹⁵ Thus, Boris turned from a fascist oppressor of the people into a responsible father of his nation, who had managed not only to save 'his' Jews from deportation, but also to keep his country out of the German campaign against the USSR.¹⁶ Now he was no longer an irresponsible politician who, betraying his own national interests, had aimed at an alliance with Germany, but rather a clever tactician or even a 'fox', as he was frequently labelled, who had made the best out of the unavoidable cooperation with the Nazis.¹⁷ From this point of view and arguing in a very pragmatic way, also the annexation of Southern Dobruža from Romania, which was achieved in 1940 cooperating with Nazi-Germany, is booked positively in the balance of Boris's government. Generally, the positive way in which he is remembered by the Bulgarian public today is decisively influenced by his clever policy towards Germany and the avoided deportation of 48,000 Jews. The fascist elements of his regime are increasingly neglected by the public memory.¹⁸

This discourse is important not only for the re-evaluation of the monarchic institution itself and its most prominent representatives. It is also motivated by a broad request for a figure of national identification. In this sense, Boris becomes not only the personified evidence that a monarchy can also achieve positive results, he also embodies good pre-socialist Bulgaria and, thus, provides for the possibility of the country's 'return' to its history after 45 years of communist dictatorship.

On the other hand, the old historical terminology is still broadly in use. Especially the period between 1935 and 1944 is still commonly labelled as "fascist", which actually does not necessarily mean that the users of this term can give a precise definition of it. Correspondingly, the forces of the "Fatherland Front", i.e. the partisans are called 'antifascist'.¹⁹ Thus, a parallel presence of contradictory historical images within large parts of Bulgarian society must be noted. In this context, one and the same person might characterise the era of Boris III, viewed as a responsible leader who guided his nation amidst the dangers of his time, by using the terms he has learned during decades of communist rule. Attempts at a more balanced evaluation of Boris's regime, coming from outside the daily political confrontations, have hardly had any impact beyond the academic discourse. This, however, does not mean that the academic discourse itself was not influenced by party politics. Apparently the latter have a stronger impact on academics than vice versa, and it might be wrong to draw a clear separation line between these two contexts.

Authors like Nikolay Poppetrov or Evgeniya Kalinova and Iskra Baeva have elaborated on the authoritarian features of Boris's regime as well as its differences

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See e.g. H. Bojadžiev, *Spasjavaneto na bălgarskite evrei prez Vtorata svetovna vojna*, Sofia 1991.

¹⁷ Ibid. See also G. Nissim, *Der Mann der Hitler stoppte*, Berlin 2000.

¹⁸ Poppetrov, *Autoritarismus*, see above and B. Dimitrov, 'Bulgaria in the interim between bourgeois democracy and fascism', in www.bulgaria.com/history/bulgaria/interim.html, last accessed: July 2002.

¹⁹ B. Dimitrov, *Bulgaria in the interim*, see above. More differentiated arguments can be found in: E. Kalinova, I. Baeva, *Bălgarskite prechodi 1944-1999*, Sofija 2000: 13 and P.S. Cvetkov, 'Demokracijata i nejnite alternativi v Bălgarija mežu dvete svetovni vojni', in *120 godini*, 177-87.

from fascist regimes of the same time. Especially Poppetrov, who published articles about this topic already during the 1980s in West-German periodicals, has presented a clear and differentiated picture of the King's government between 1918 and 1943. As mentioned above, instead of the ideologically discredited term 'monarcho-fascism' he characterised the regime as 'monarchic-authoritarian with single fascist elements'. According to him, several anti-constitutional actions taken by Boris during the years of his government are most typical of his political style.²⁰

His Majesty the prime minister

Nevertheless it is exactly this 'straightforward' style of policy-making, which makes monarchy attractive to its Bulgarian supporters. The reference to King Boris, who, according to this view, had conducted an intelligent foreign policy, ended domestic political confrontations and proved to be humane by saving the Jews, serves as a foundation for the protests of large parts of Bulgarian society against the obvious corruption and incompetence of Bulgarian politicians. Moreover, this disposition of the electorate opened the opportunity to Boris's son, Simeon II, formally the last king of Bulgaria, to appear on the country's political scene in spring 2001. Even though the results of opinion polls proved that in the Bulgarian public there was no majority for the reintroduction of monarchy, the great popularity Simeon achieved during his campaign seems to be inexplicable without the above mentioned change in the historical image of the monarchic idea after 1989.²¹ He profited from his father's royal aura, which in many cases resulted in a transformation of the sympathies he experienced in large parts of the country into a quasi-religious admiration. Thus, the people's expectations towards Simeon became clear: following in his father's footsteps he would come to Bulgaria like a messiah, take things into his hands, and solve the problems, which mainly are of a social nature, from a position above the level of everyday politics.²²

These expectations were certainly not an expression of deep anti-democratic feelings among the people of Bulgaria, but they showed great disappointment about the achievements of parliamentary democracy after 1989. Neither the Socialists nor the Union of Democratic forces, having been in power since 1997, had realised a significant increase in the standard of living. Moreover, they had been discredited by many cases of corruption. Therefore, Simeon had a double advantage when he started his election campaign in spring 2001: first, he had the aura of a king, second, he came from 'outside' and, thus, was not compromised by any Bulgarian political intrigues.²³

In addition to his royal appearance, however, he made some concrete promises and programmatic statements during his campaign, which also played an important role for his overwhelming victory in the elections of June 2001. The most remarkable one certainly was the promise to raise the general standard of living within 800 days. At the time when his election programme was published, it was, on the other hand, unclear, if, in case of a victory, Simeon himself would become prime minister, i.e. he would be responsible for the realisation of this policy.²⁴

²⁰ See above.

²¹ M. Wien, *Parlamentswahlen*: 13-5.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.* 30.

²⁴ Simeon's electoral programme: *Bălgarija - dobăr dom za svoite graždani. Predizborna programa na koalicija "Nacionalno dviženie Simeon Vtori"*, Sofija 2001.

The extremely personalised character of his campaign which presented Simeon as a 'King' functioned as an indicator of the attraction of the monarchic idea to the Bulgarian public. As the results of the election prove, he successfully used his royal status in manifold ways. First of all, there was the naming of his 'movement', created on the basis of two small parties, since Simeon had been forbidden by a decision of the Supreme Court to participate in the elections with his own party. The movement was named "The National Movement Simeon the Second".²⁵ Thus, Simeon made clear that he was not only the central, but also the constituting figure of the movement, i.e. its personified legitimacy. Using his royal name including the number – 'the Second' – instead of his actual family name 'Sakskoburggotski', he implicitly laid claims to the throne. This impression was underlined by the fact that his staff called him "Your Majesty", and that he resided in his old royal castle 'Vranya' outside Sofia. Additionally, he made ambiguous public statements concerning the question of the reintroduction of monarchy. Being asked about this issue he usually replied that this question was not on the agenda "at the moment" or that it would be decided as soon as the time came.²⁶ In addition to this, there were speculations that he might participate in the presidential elections in autumn 2001, and that afterwards, based on the parliamentary majority of his movement, he would try to change the constitution in favour of a reintroduction of the monarchy. Those who made these speculations forgot, however, that such a plan, if it existed, was impracticable, since the constitution requires that candidates must have had their residence in Bulgaria for at least five years in order to be admitted to the presidential elections, which was not the case with Simeon.²⁷ Nevertheless, speculation continued to the effect that what Simeon was aiming at was not the kind of political responsibility a prime minister assumes, but rather the monarchic role of the father of the nation. After his triumph in the elections he seemed to confirm these assumptions. In a manner which appears to be unusual for a parliamentary democracy he made the public wait for about three weeks, before he decided to declare his readiness to become prime minister. Apparently he did so very reluctantly and claiming not to have foreseen this development of events. Obviously he found the post of prime minister inappropriate for himself as he now had to run the risk that daily political problems might damage not only his personal reputation, but also the monarchic idea, which, in the public view, was associated with him.²⁸

Notwithstanding the possible future success of his government, the elections suggested that royal aura, such as Simeon's, fascinated the electorate and was able to influence the voting significantly, even though, according to the above mentioned opinion polls, the elections cannot be interpreted as support for his re-enthronisation. Nevertheless, the public notion of the monarchy had become to a large extent connected to Simeon – similar to the change in its historical image, which almost completely was associated with Boris III. The increasing respect he, i.e. his memory, enjoyed during the 1990s was beneficial for his son Simeon, too. Occasionally, it resulted in the naïve assumption that Simeon had inherited his father's political capabilities and, thus, was able to guide his country through the uncertainties of the future.²⁹

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ M. Wien, Parlamentswahlen, 27. Also: F. Nienhusen, 'Im Reich des schüchternen Königs', in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Munich), 16 July 2001: 10.

²⁷ *Konstitucija na Republika Bălgarija*, 13.7.1991, čl. 93 (2). See: <www.parliament.bg/const.html>, last accessed 7 May 2001.

²⁸ M. Wien: Parlamentswahlen, 31f.

²⁹ Ibid. 13-5.

The image of the monarchy in connection with political and ideological convictions

The way in which the historical image of the Bulgarian monarchy changed after 1989 indicates that, as described above, this development basically consisted of a politically, as well as socially, motivated re-evaluation of its leading representatives. This transformation ranged from the obligatory rejection of the 'fascist' monarchy before 1989 to a situation at the turn of century, when the possibility of its re-introduction was openly discussed. These discussions were for the most part associated with the son of Boris III, Simeon II.

The Union of Democratic Forces made clear to which extent the relation of the political parties to the monarchy depended on political interests and strategies of election campaigns. As mentioned above, until the end of the 1990s the position of the UDF was friendly towards the monarchy – they had invited Simeon to Bulgaria several times to gain political profit from his image and that of the monarchy – , though the UDF were not monarchist, and this was only part of their anti-communist attitude. Representatives of the party, such as Prime Minister Kostov or President Stoyanov, showed up in public together with Simeon and re-introduced the royal code of arms.³⁰ As soon as Simeon revealed his political ambitions in spring 2001, they started to downgrade him to the status of a political *parvenu*, without success, as the elections proved.³¹ In contrast, the Bulgarian Socialist Party tried to remain distant, even indifferent to Simeon and the confrontation between him and UDF. Seemingly, BSP focussed on mobilising their genuine electorate – still trying to overcome the consequences of the defeat of 1997. Generally, they remained out of the focus of public attention which clearly focussed on Simeon.

The voting, the events associated with it and the following months and years made clear, however, that the Bulgarian attitude towards the monarchy and its historical image depends on political developments. After the first two years of Simeon's government the public enthusiasm for him as well as for the monarchy seemed to decline. The sympathy he had enjoyed at the beginning had been grounded in two factors: firstly, the generally miserable living conditions in connection with political disorientation and, secondly, the fact that he was a man of the right age, who embodied the monarchic idea and at the same time was at least apparently capable of taking political responsibility. This could be a possible explanation as to why he was the only former East European monarch who managed to regain considerable political influence in his country after decades of communist dictatorship.³² This influence, however, declined again after the elections of 2005, which brought the socialists back to being the strongest party. Still, they were forced to form a broad coalition with a number of other parties, including Simeon's NDSV. 'His Majesty the Prime Minister' had to abdicate and turned into a 'normal' Bulgarian politician as the chairman of his party.

³⁰ J. Gruber, 'Bulgarien im ersten Jahr der Regierung von Ex-König Simeon Saksoburggotski. Handwerkliche Fehler des Kabinetts oder Beginn einer krisenhaften Entwicklung?', in www.kas.de/publikationen/2002/ai/03_gruber.pdf, 2., last accessed: July 2002

³¹ Wien: Parlamentswahlen 13.

³² See also: H.-J. Hoppe, 'Saison für Könige! Macht das bulgarische Modell Schule?', in *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, 3, 2002: 54-67.